

OP-EDS

# THE MADNESS OF THE ACADEMY

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The Academy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Popular Film isn't winning many popularity contests itself. The announcement on August 8 of the newest "Oscar" has been received with far less enthusiasm than this year's megahit movies like "Black Panther" and "Mission: Impossible — Fallout" that will vie for the statuette.

The new award's intended purpose is to supplement a Best Picture trophy consistently won over the last decade by films appealing mainly to the Academy's insider circle, despite popular movies being included in an expanded slate of nominees. After all, the big bucks spent by mainstream moviegoers are what not only turn big-budget movies into blockbusters but, via advertisers, pay for the Oscars telecast.

Instead, both industry professionals and the general public have made it overwhelmingly clear that they're more insulted than intrigued. As populist outreach, it comes off as phony as Nurse Ratched rigging the vote on which TV program her patients can watch in the Oscar-winning "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

The misfire exemplifies what cartoonist Jules Feiffer called the "ignorance of authority," satirized in his Best Animated Short winner "Munro," in which officials maintain that the four-year-old of the title is a diminutive adult.

In "Karl Hess: Toward Liberty," which won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject in 1981, Hess observed that "if energy can be picked up from any point on the earth, it sort of suggests to you that you don't need central mechanisms, that you can produce important things at a local level." This applies just as much to creative energies that inspire filmmaking as to the solar energy that powered Hess's house. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum noted the irony of Hess's message being "delivered courtesy of the Academy and AT&T's Bell System" while the onetime political insider talked of leaving such "big



organizations” behind. Yet film production and distribution have already been steadily evolving in Hess’s decentralist direction; even the major studios have moved on from the era shown in “Hail, Caesar!” of filming their Biblical epics, musicals and Westerns all within the same backlot.

While Guillermo del Toro won the most recent Best Director award for the esoteric “The Shape of Water” rather than for one of his crowd-pleasers like “Blade II” or “Pacific Rim,” his arthouse and multiplex fare both illustrate the contention in his acceptance speech that “the greatest thing our art does, and our industry does, is to erase the lines in the sand. We should continue doing that when the world tells us to make them deeper.”

Maybe the real issue is the notion that the Academy Awards, or any one award ceremony, should or even can be the ultimate arbiter of quality in a diverse world. The assumption that other film awards are merely lead-ins to (or the Razzies’ caricature of) the Oscars does a disservice to both. The venerable ceremony would do better competing on an equal footing with newer awards taken just as seriously than as the center of attention by default.

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## PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY

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